

EXIT

QUEST



THE ART OF SELLING IDEAS A few moments with Bob Kosberg, Hollywood idea man and pitch master

BY BOB KODZIS

In the modern world of business, it is useless to be a creative, original thinker unless you can also sell what you create.

— David Ogilvy

If you are a creative professional, pitching needs to be one of your strongest talents. Too many great ideas never see the light of day for want of an effective pitch. And there are countless other stories, all of them tragic, of supremely original ideas that flat-lined on the pitching room table.

This Quest is dedicated to upping our PQ (Pitching Quotient).

In the thick of the creative jungle, a good pitch person is like a guide with a sharp machete carving out the shortest scenic path between a great idea and the people who have the resources to bring that idea to life. Nowhere in the world is that creative jungle thicker than in the movie studios of Hollywood. So what better place to find a gifted and well-traveled guide to lead us on the pitching portion of the Quest?

Meet Bob Kosberg; Hollywood writer, producer, idea harvester and pitch master. Kosberg contacted me a few weeks ago and pitched me on idea of interviewing him for the Quest. I suppose this column is evidence that the man knows how to sell.

If selling ideas is an art form, then Bob Kosberg may well be the Picasso of the pitch. Working out of Nash Entertainment located at Sunset Gower Studios in Hollywood, Kosberg makes an excellent living by selling creative ideas to some of the toughest audiences on the planet. In the fickle, hyper-political world of Hollywood, where ideas ricochet off the skulls of movie studio executives like bullets off Superman's chest, Kosberg finds a way to penetrate. That's no small feat.

Although few, if any, of his projects have garnered the attention of the Academy, Kosberg has worked on a wide variety of interesting and, in some cases, commercially successful films and television projects. He was an associate producer of the Arnold Schwarzenegger movie "Commando" and an executive producer of the sci-fi thriller "12 Monkeys." Kosberg also executive produced a horror flick called "Man's Best Friend," which starred Ally Sheedy and a psychopathic dog. Kosberg pitched that one as "Jaws with Paws." Bad movie, great pitch.

Currently, Kosberg is producing "The Hardy Men" with Stuart Cornfeld and Ben Stiller, who will co-star in the film with Tom Cruise. It's schedule for release in 2009.

Kosberg likes to say that he gets paid to tell bedtime stories to adults.

“There is no single formula to becoming an effective idea person”

IMMERSE YOURSELF

“There is no single formula to becoming an effective idea person or pitch person,” Kosberg says. “I recommend that anyone who is interested in this line of business read a lot and get out a lot. Don’t sit in a vacuum. Surround yourself with interesting, smart and imaginative people. Be very media savvy.

“You need to be up on everything out there ... the Internet, the news, movies and TV shows, even comic books. Stay open to all subjects and immerse yourself in culture. This is how I begin the volley of the brain synapses.”

“I don’t think the world knows the value of good ideas. I hear so many people say, ‘Ideas are a dime a dozen.’ They’re not. Only BAD ideas are a dime a dozen. A good idea can be worth millions.”

— Bob Kosberg

KISSING A LOT OF FROGS

This business requires superhuman persistence and a constant belief that the next best idea may be just around the corner. By Kosberg’s best estimate, only one out of every 500 ideas that he reviews are “good” and viable ideas. Of those acceptable ideas, only one in 10 will actually sell. Of those ideas sold, only one out of 20 ever actually gets made into a motion picture. Simplifying the math, one out of every 10,000 ideas Kosberg reviews finds its way into production.

That’s a lot of frogs to kiss before you find the prince of your dreams.

With odds like that, you have to be dealing in very high volume of ideas. To that end, and others, Kosberg launched MoviePitch.com — a Web site that solicits ideas from all over the world for Kosberg’s and his partners’ consideration and development. Through this venture, Kosberg has received ideas from all over the planet and from every walk of life including “an idea written in crayon from a prison cell.” Kosberg and his partners sort through them all looking for great story ideas and other nuggets of creativity.

PANNING FOR GOLD

When prospecting among the mountains of ideas that he encounters, Kosberg uses a screening process that seems almost too simple and very subjective, “I ask myself two basic questions: ‘Is this a good idea?’ and ‘Is this a good story?’” Then he shifts, seamlessly, to telling the story of the “little old lady from Ozark, AR” who pitched him a concept that met both criteria. She asked if he was interested in a story about a man who lives in the Statue of Liberty. Her working title was “Keeper of the Flame.” Kosberg says he loved it. Eventually he pitched the idea and sold it, making that little old lady and Kosberg, a big old bundle of money.

PERSISTENT, AGGRESSIVE, OBSESSIVE

Throughout our discussion, I feel a certain tenacity behind Kosberg’s charm. He talks fast and fills almost every moment with a story or an example. He’s dropping names I should know and he leaves virtually no dead air space. When I ask him if he’s doing that circular breathing that Kenny G does to hold the really long notes, he laughs and explains, “I just don’t want to bore you.” He is anything but boring. In fact I’m struggling to take notes fast enough. I ask him what traits contribute most to his success as a professional pitch man. Kosberg does not hesitate, “I am persistent, aggressive and sometimes obsessive.” Dr. Seuss could not have put it better.

THE DRAWBRIDGE

One of the toughest parts of the pitch business in Hollywood is getting a face-to-face meeting with decision makers. Everybody wants a piece of their time. A friend who moved to California as a screenwriter once told me that “these people have systems to guard against guerilla pitches.” Kosberg acknowledges the challenge: “You have to find your way in. And you need to find a way to support yourself while you are seeking that opportunity.”

Kosberg considers himself one of the solutions to that problem. He calls himself the drawbridge to get into Hollywood. He has regular access to the decision makers, movers and shakers. And he is more than happy to be a conduit to those decision makers for idea people around the world. If you are willing to share the rights to and the profits from your ideas with Bob Kosberg, he may be willing to share your idea with his connections in Hollywood. So far, Kosberg estimates he has reviewed more than 50,000 ideas and listened to more than 20,000 verbal pitches.

“There’s something magical in coming up with an idea from thin air. My gift was that I could reduce a complex idea to one sentence ... which the Hollywood press found very amusing.”

— Bob Kosberg

CUT TO THE CHASE

One thing that undoubtedly contributed to Kosberg’s ability to sell so effectively using so few words is his early work experience. Shortly after graduating from UCLA Film School, he worked in a low- to mid-level job with a Hollywood producer. His job was to read scripts and to summarize them. “I developed a talent for very quickly summarizing ideas and materials ... a very necessary skill as a screenwriter.” It was at this formative part of his career that Kosberg began seeking out ideas beyond the scripts he was reading; things that he could bring to the office for “brownie points.” It was the start of what has become a very long and successful career selling ideas.





A FUSION

I am genuinely surprised when Kosberg tells me that he thinks originality is overrated. Then he explains that the best pitches are a lot more than original ideas, they involve a perfect fusion between the listeners' current frame of reference and the new idea. That connection is crucial for the idea to resonate with the audience. The idea is new to them, but they can relate to it immediately and they understand its context. Employing this fusion concept has the effect of adding an accelerant to the sales process. People get the ideas faster and their grasp of the concept is deeper and more profound.

"A great pitch is like a great joke. Get in, get the laugh and get out!"

— Bob Kosberg

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS

Kosberg says that there are a few core ingredients to an outstanding pitch. The first, and most important, is the quality of the idea being sold. In essence, if the idea has no legs, the pitch won't have any legs either. Kosberg makes it very clear, "What makes a project sell, is the idea."

Some of the other pitching essentials that Kosberg offers include enthusiasm, a good sense of humor, accessibility, a sense of excitement and a sense of economy. He suggests that most good pitching has rhythm and logic and it doesn't waste people's time. "And the story behind every pitch must have a chronology," Kosberg emphasizes. "It has to have a beginning, a middle and an end."

Finally, Kosberg focuses on the fuel behind the sale. "To pitch well, you need passion," Kosberg says. "I see every pitch as a movie in my brain. Remember how you feel when you see a great movie? It generates a contagious excitement. That's exactly what I want to bring to every pitch."

KILLING THE PITCH

If you want your pitch to fail, Kosberg's advice is simple: "Don't speak up. Show no enthusiasm. Be forgetful and incoherent. Offer too much detail and lead the group on irrelevant tangents."

"Most people don't know how to summarize," Kosberg says. "Creating a pitch is like writing a sixth grade book report."

THAT'S NUTS

At the end of our interview, I ask Kosberg to share a couple of the most outrageous ideas he ever pitched. He pauses for a moment, as if flipping through his mental Rolodex of crazy ideas. Then he offers these two beauties; ideas that had to take a lot of courage, conviction and a tiny spark of insanity to pitch.

"Afterlife" — a television series concept Kosberg developed with his partners David Simon and Gail Parent. It follows the adventures of America's first dead family and answers the burning question: "What does the Encino, NJ afterlife look like?"

"Head Trip" — a movie concept created by the same team about a guy who was thought to have been killed by the mob, but his head survived. The head, escorted by a female FBI agent, must take a cross-country trip. It's a race for time before the mob killers catch up and finish the job they started. Kosberg pitched this one as "'Midnight Run' with a head."

Thanks so much to Bob Kosberg for this head trip of an interview. His knowledge and insights taught me a lot about the crazy and courageous world of the creative pitch. His contribution has placed yet another piece into the creative puzzle of our Quest. ■

Until next time, stay inspired

BK

Bob Kodzis is an award-winning artist, keynote speaker and performer. He has been contributing ideas and articles to *Create Magazine* for five years. Kodzis is also a facilitator and founder of the wildly creative thinktank Flight of Ideas, Inc. — a company whose mission it is to unleash a new level of fun and creativity throughout the world. His clients range from the United Way to Kennedy Space Center to Vekoma, the largest rollercoaster manufacturer in the world. You can contact Kodzis directly online at Bob@flightofideas.net, or check out his cool Web site at www.flightofideas.net.